

CATAPULT FLIGHT RENUMBERING 1936

On 15 July 1936 the various catapult flights were all renumbered in the 700 range, as follows:

- 403 Flight became 715 Flight, 5th Cruiser Squadron.
- 406 Flight became 714 Flight, 4th Cruiser Squadron.
- 407 Flight became 712 Flight, 2nd Cruiser Squadron.
- 443 Flight became 716 Flight, 6th Cruiser Squadron, and 718 Flight, 8th Cruiser Squadron.
- 444 Flight became 702 Flight, 2nd Battle Squadron, and 705 Flight, Battlecruiser Squadron.
- 445 Flight became 713 Flight, 3rd Cruiser Squadron.
- 447 Flight was disbanded to provide the nuclei for 702 Squadron, 1st Battle Squadron, and 711 Flight, 1st Cruiser Squadron.

These units had all risen to squadron status by the early months of 1939.

BELOW When fitted with floats, the *Swordfish* also saw service as a catapult-mounted spotter aircraft on board several major warships.

64 were ordered during 1936 and started to enter service during the spring of the following year.

The biggest news of all at this time, however, was the ordering of a new state-of-the-art aircraft carrier in 1935. HMS *Ark Royal* (the same name as had been previously borne by the seaplane

carrier) represented a major step forward in carrier development. All the earlier carriers acquired by the Royal Navy had been provided with two lifts to remove aircraft from the deck to the hangar below. *Argus*, *Hermes* and *Eagle* had also been too limited in size to accommodate much more than 20 aircraft. *Furious*, following her rebuild in 1925, had been able to embark 33, while *Courageous* and *Glorious* could each cope with 48. The new vessel, however, was to feature three lifts which allowed its aircraft complement to increase to 60 – or even 72 in an emergency. *Ark Royal* would be launched during 1937, commissioning taking place in 1938.

Another development which just preceded the arrival of *Ark Royal* was the introduction of the Deck Landing Control Officer (known colloquially as 'The Batsman'). It was the role of this individual to stand on one side of the deck at the stern of the ship when an aircraft was approaching to land. As it did so, he would indicate by a series of standard signals with the large 'bats' he held in each hand whether the incoming machine was too high, too low, not level, etc. Just before the aircraft was ready to touch the deck and was in the correct position to do so, he would cross his arms and the bats in front of himself, indicating that the engine should

be cut at that moment. If he was not satisfied that the aircraft was positioned to make a safe landing, he would give the 'wave-off' sign – which was just that, a wave off with his bats. This system of landing control would continue to be employed until well after the Second World War, and was adopted on the aircraft carriers of all navies which employed them.

At this time military aircraft design had taken another major leap forward, occasioned by a substantial increase in the power of the aircraft engines now becoming available. Monoplane designs with retractable undercarriages, enclosed cockpits for the crew, greatly enhanced armament and weapons-carrying capability, and all-metal stressed-skin construction, pointed the way ahead.

The first such monoplane for the Fleet Air Arm appeared in 1937. This was the Blackburn Skua dive-bomber/fighter, which was not dissimilar to aircraft being designed and constructed for the US and Japanese navies. With a top speed of 225mph and a forward-firing armament doubled from the traditional two machine guns to four, it seemed to have a performance sufficient to at least keep pace with any bomber aircraft which might threaten the fleet, and which it might potentially attempt

to intercept. The additional offensive capacity occasioned by its ability to dive-bomb must also have been welcome.

However, the Admiralty was concerned (very properly) that a machine more closely comparable in speed and armament to the Hurricane and Spitfire, which were also appearing at that time, ought to be made available to the Navy. Unfortunately, though, the Admiralty required a second seat in such aircraft for a navigator, to ensure a safe return to the parent carrier should adverse weather be encountered. This was clearly at variance with the years of successful flying experienced with the Flycatcher and the Nimrod, but a stated reason for their contrary decision has not been discovered.

The Air Ministry accordingly prepared and issued the necessary specification, but design and construction of prototypes would take some time. Despite the imminent availability of the Skua, therefore, the worsening political situation in Europe meant that something was required to fill the gap until a truly modern fighter could be made available. Even had a navalised version of the Hurricane or Spitfire been considered at that time, the urgent need for all such aircraft to re-equip the

BELOW Introduced into service in 1938 in the new role of fighter/dive-bomber, the Blackburn Skua was the Fleet Air Arm's first all-metal monoplane for carrier operations. It was to serve with some distinction during 1940, but was quickly outclassed by the opponents it might encounter. Here a formation of aircraft from 803 Squadron are seen in flight just before the outbreak of war in 1939. They would be the last fleet aircraft to be finished in bright peacetime colours, which would soon be covered by coats of camouflage paint.

